

Personnel chief addresses tough issues

RAMSTEIN AIR BASE, Germany (AFNS) – The Air Force's top official for personnel issues recently gave concrete answers to some of the hottest topics among airmen and their families.

"You can be assured that we are working hard to improve the well-being of our military members, retirees, and their families," said Lt. Gen. Michael McGinty, Air Force deputy chief of staff for personnel. "I recently testified before the Senate armed services subcommittee on personnel and the House national security subcommittee on military personnel and reported that we have favorable support from the House and Senate when it comes to quality-of-life issues."

On the issues, the general said:

❑ Revamp the basic allowances for quarters and subsistence

"The purpose of the reforms is to establish credible allowances based on external sources, and getting the right amount of money to the right people. The proposed BAS reform will tie subsistence to the U.S. Department of Agriculture food index (accepted as the cost of food and well-balanced meals for people between 20-50 years old) vice the current method of tying to pay raises.

"The proposed BAQ reform combines BAQ and (Variable Housing Allowance) into a single allowance and ties the allowance to locality-based data, replacing the current survey expenditure-based system; rank remains a factor. The reform removes inefficiencies in the current system, includes a 'save pay' provision, and we hope to be able to buy down absorption in the future."

❑ Study to reduce BAS

"The office of the secretary of defense and the services are proposing the BAS reform. The plan is to allow 1 percent BAS increases until the allowance equals the USDA food costs and then increase BAS at the same rate as the USDA index. The BAS reform also calls for BAS for all. This will allow enlisted members not currently receiving BAS to receive a partial BAS equal to the dollar difference between the dining facility meal rate and BAS. The actual funding for this reform will depend on available funds. On the table is a cost-neutral plan within the Department of Defense; however, if additional funds become available, the funding of the reform could change."

❑ Enlistees can only expect to get 35 percent to 40 percent retirement upon 20 years of service

"Enlisted members who enter the service after July 31, 1986 receive 40 percent of their highest 36 months of basic pay earned."

❑ Downsize medical treatment

"The Military Health Services is conducting an ongoing force-structure review to ensure that scarce resources are used efficiently. The sense of Congress is that any savings generated by restructuring must not come at the expense of beneficiaries. The Air Force fully supports this position. Over 3.3 million active-duty and retired airmen and their family members receive managed care through an effective partnership of military and contract providers under the new DOD health care benefit called TRICARE."

❑ Base schools under state control

"Most base schools have always been under state control (except Maxwell AFB, Ala., and Robins AFB, Ga.). The Department of Education offsets local and state taxes by providing additional funds to districts. We have not heard any word of requiring the military to pay the state tax because of a family member attending a state school."

❑ Proposal to cut retirement pay at age 65 by 40 percent

"The words we have expressed to Congress are preservation and stability in our retirement system. As you know we are now under three retirement systems: Final Basic Pay, High-3, and the Military Retirement Reform Act. We are watching very closely how these three different retirement systems impact recruiting and retention;

however, we expect proposals to change the retirement system to continue as this nation attempts to balance the budget. Current groups proposing changes are the Senator Gregg Task Force, Blue Dog Coalition, Centrist Coalition, and the Concord Coalition."

❑ Proposal to withhold active-duty retirement until age 65

"Again, we stand ready to protect our retirement system in recognition of the sacrifices of our service members – preservation and stability are the key words."

❑ Members of the House and Senate have minimum military experience

"The number of congresspersons without military experience has increased. These individuals have a tough task at hand – trying to balance the budget and balancing the defense programs with other important issues. It is the responsibility of each of us to educate these members of Congress. I was very pleased to hear that many of our congresspersons are visiting bases, talking to the troops, and are sincerely concerned about the quality of life of our military members and their families. It's also important to note that they are listening to the concerns of our retirees."

❑ Child care privatization

"No outsourcing of our child care facilities are currently under way. If such actions are deemed necessary in the future, the Air Force will ensure providers meet the same or higher standards of quality currently enjoyed."

❑ Same amount of people as in 1948

"The total number of people in 1948 was 386,392 (48,957 officers and 337,435 enlisted). Today there

are 383,904 (75,025 officers and 308,879 enlisted). Our current strength levels are based on mission requirements. Our current end-strength levels provide the capability to support two major regional conflicts."

❑ Lose \$220 a month while in Bosnia

"The Joint Task Force commander and (commanders in chief) have flexibility in selecting per diem options for deployed troops: (1) Authorize regular (temporary duty) – enlisted receive incidental rate of per diem and retain BAS; (2) Declare essential unit messing – enlisted receive incidental rate and forfeit BAS; and (3) Participating in field exercises – receive no per diem and forfeit BAS. Members serving in Bosnia also receive Imminent Danger Pay (\$150 a month) and Combat Zone Tax Exclusion (enlisted pay exempt from taxation while serving in designated combat zone or qualified hazardous duty area)."

❑ Suicide rates

"The average number of suicides (in the Air Force) is 60 (per year) for the past five years. In 1996, the Air Force experienced 48 suicides. About 30 percent of the suicides have been linked to trouble with the law. Annual suicide prevention training became mandatory with the new March 1997 Air Force Instruction."

❑ Military in debt

"We are concerned about the financial solvency of our military members and have programs in the family support centers to assist our military members. Debt in the military is comparable to the civilian community. Military members should take advantage of the financial services the Air Force offers. The Air Force Aid Society and Red Cross are also welcome options."

❑ Survivor Benefit Plan

"Under current law, SBP premiums are suspended if a military member's spouse predeceases the member. If a member remarries and wants coverage for a new spouse, the premium will be deducted from the member's retired pay. DOD submitted a report to Congress containing many options to improve and add flexibility to the SBP program – we support these initiatives." (Courtesy of U.S. Air Forces in Europe News Service)

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